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PARALLEL PATTERN: A FAMILIAL LEGACY OF CARE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts  
at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019

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May 2019

## Acknowledgments

To my dream team committee, thank you for your generosity, care, support, and love of cats. I am so lucky to have spent the last two years working with you.  
To Hilary, thank you for the countless hours in your office, with conversations on every subject.  
To Cara, thank you for always asking the important questions and all the thoughtful exercises.  
To Hope, thank you for your meditative magic and shared love of Brâncuși.

To Holly and Brooke, for enriching and expanding my knowledge and love of printmaking.  
To Noah and Margaret, for being my TX Transplant Club and continuing to provide guidance and support in myriads of ways.  
To Aaron, for sharing your infinite knowledge of history and textiles.  
To Gregory, for your exuberant enthusiasm.  
To Amber, for your support and insight.

To the fellow Painting + Printmaking graduates of my year: Katie Barrie, Wallis Cheung, Cait Porter, Emily Wardell, and Su Yu. To my peers in the years above and below: Azim Al Ghusseini, Christiana Becker, Bryan Castro, John Chae, Kyrae Cowan, Paul Finch, Lauren Hensens, Daliya Jokondo, GM Keaton, Liang Luscombe, Seren Moran, Be Oakley, Johanna Robinson, Michael Royce, Greg Piwonka, Luis Vasquez La Roche.  
Thank you for all the learning and laughter.

I'd like to thank all the brilliant fellow students I am so lucky to have had as peers here across departments — too many for this small space, but I will gladly shout from rooftops.  
Special shout-outs to Francheska Alcantara, Hannah Bates, Eric Anthony Berdis, Laura Boban, Peter Cochrane, Stephanie DeMer, Marie Fornaro, Trish Gibson, Raul De Lara, Taylor Zarkades King, Coco Klockner, Nicole Levaque, Andy Lowrie, Evie Metz, Mariana Parisca, David Riley, Hannah Shaban, Sandy Williams, agustine zegers.

Dedicated to the three grandparents I am so lucky to have grown up with: Elena, Georgeta, and Ștefan, and my incredible parents that I owe everything to: Valeria and Bogdan Antohe.

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## Abstract

### PARALLEL PATTERN: A FAMILIAL LEGACY OF CARE

By Diana Antohe, Master of Fine Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019.

Major Director: Hilary Wilder, Associate Professor, Painting and Printmaking Department

My work revolves around exploring identity of the in-between, occupying the Venn diagram middle of two cultures. As a Romanian-born, American-raised artist, I want to preserve and broadcast links to the cultures of my upbringing and birthplace. In attempts to ground and define my own “in-between” identity, I look to my parents and grandparents for cues on how they made home for themselves wherever they went, reflecting their experiences with voluntary and involuntary displacement. This text connects the research and influential family practices that shaped its companion exhibition, ranging from the role of portability in emotional transnationalism to the lasting mythology the soap opera “Dallas” holds in Romania.

## **Allegiances**

My maternal grandmother in Romania always said I was destined for America — led by the fate of my July 4th birthday. She meant it as the highest compliment. Looking back now, I wonder if this belief helped her rationalize the great physical distance between us when my parents decided that the three of us were staying in Texas.

I became a U.S. citizen during my last semester of undergraduate studies. The ceremony itself had many components that hadn't been communicated in advance. After showing my green card to an employee for identification, I was momentarily confused when she didn't hand it back. I was so used to it being a precious document I safeguarded when I flew to visit my grandparents on my own. As part of the event, there were montages of black-and-white Ellis Island photos, and one of sweeping American landscapes set to "Proud to be an American". At one point, an officer read an alphabetical list of all the birth countries of the newly-minted U.S. citizens present at that day's ceremony. We were asked to stand when our country was called. I was the only one there that day that was born in Romania.

Of the entire process, the Naturalization Oath took me aback the most. The text includes that one must "absolutely and entirely renounce and abjure all allegiance and fidelity to any foreign prince, potentate, state, or sovereignty, of whom or which I have heretofore been a subject or citizen". The oath felt cold and isolating, and I felt compelled to break through its formality by sharing the rich layers I was lucky to have. I felt I owed everything good in my life to this complicated and wonderful mingling, and felt adamant about celebrating it. Friends tried to brush it off, reassuring me that it was only formal, but the language of the oath still felt heavy in my mouth. It was at this point that I found it crucial to bring Romania into my studio and work. At this time, I also learned from my parents that they had initially intended on moving

back to Romania after my father obtained his PhD. It gave me pause to wonder how different my life would have been. For one, I wasn't sure I'd have ended up studying art.

Initially, my first responses to the Naturalization Oath were reactions to language and declarations of nationality. These thoughts were expressed through flag colors and symbols, rendered in paper, paint, and fabric. The work then evolved into becoming more about replicating patterns of textiles from my grandparents' apartments, trying to recreate sections in the studio as a means of feeling closer to them and the contents of their living spaces. If I couldn't be there or couldn't realistically transport the many layers of textiles, I could create smaller, flatter versions of them.

During my time in graduate school, my practice evolved through ruminations on the perspective of 'in-betweenness'. I realized I only know Romania through the specific context of my family. My understanding of my birth country was shaped by the summers I spent with my grandparents there in their care, and by the stories my parents chose to disclose over time. As is likely the case for anyone who is lucky to grow up with grandparents, I worried about what it would be like after they died. I also distinctly remember the added question of what my relationship to Romania would be after they were gone. My last grandparent, my maternal grandmother, Bunica Elena, suddenly passed in January 2018 during my first year of graduate study. I had just posed this question in my final review statement the previous month.

In the wake of loss and shifting circumstances, how do we ground ourselves? In this instance, I turned to following the examples of my family's values and practices in putting together a home and a new life. I learned from them that home could be an action, and that care was a core element.



## **Textiles as Point of Connection**

In my family, textiles were used as both objects of connection and placeholders for past homes. My grandparents' way of coping with the distance between us was by communicating care and values however they could — typically constrained to mailed letters and items that could be sent over in someone else's suitcase. This meant that a lot of our physical connection early on was through textile and paper, things that lent themselves to this purpose due to their portability. Sweaters and macramé doilies could be easily transported through a network of friends, and newspaper clippings and charms could be stowed in periodic mailings. I later realized that these portable things also happened to be the ones my grandparents seemed to deem essential in personal spaces. For my grandmothers, making something I would live with or sharing similar textile patterns was a way to cross physical distance.

During the Romania trip the summer after my paternal grandmother died, I discovered a familiar pattern among the stacks of linens in her bureau. The repeating motif consists of a saccharine friendship duo: a sweet, big-headed cat with a flower behind one ear, and a tiny bowtie-clad mouse. They grin at each other as the rest of the field is populated with flowers and delicate clusters of specks. The version of the textile that I had found in my grandmother's apartment had outlines rendered in black, and was detailed with an orange and green palette. The one I knew had dark blue outlines with a pink and light blue palette.

I suspect we all have things in our lives that are so familiar to us that we don't actually see them for what they are anymore, until we stop to analyze them for whatever reason. This stopped me in my tracks as I looked at an alternate version of the childhood linens my parents had brought with them on their move to the United States.



Parallel Pattern, Watercolor on Paper, 30x22 inches, 2017.

One of the first things I made during my graduate studies was a watercolor rendition of this cat-and-mouse pattern, painting it in both the blue/pink I've known from childhood, and the orange/green I discovered much later. For my thesis exhibition, I converted my watercolor version into cotton yardage and sewed a large pillowcase, embroidering it with the following words in my handwriting:

a parallel pattern  
 shared between  
 two households

Throughout my childhood, I knew that my parents and I shared the same heart and dot textile pattern with my maternal grandmother — ours in a bright blue, and hers in a light teal. I remember my delight when I realized this on my first visit to Romania, spotting this shared motif. I imagine it brought her great comfort to think that we knew the same cotton despite not seeing each other for years. Once I knew, it felt special to have a lineage of shared objects.

The women in my life had different relationships to textiles ;

My maternal grandmother: creating embroideries, macrame doilies, sweaters for us, and  
 maintaining her high standards of starched, ironed linens for hospitality purposes

My paternal grandmother: collecting textiles, displaying them on all her furniture, and  
 sharing them with me

My mother: honoring, treasuring, taking care of these items and displaying them on all  
 surfaces of the home

Me: continuing the care and value, but working with them from a drawing/painting  
 influence as well

Once I started working with textiles after the Naturalization process, both of my grandmothers immediately offered full access to their linens — whether it was for my home, the studio, or both. My use of embroidery is typically different than that of my maternal grandmother's depiction of patterns. In Dorothy Norris Harkness' studies of Romanian embroidery, she defines variety as a qualifying characteristic — explaining that “though the embroidery patterns were traditional designs handed down with techniques from generation to

generation, each woman used her own interpretation and added her own individual touch”.<sup>1</sup> I count myself as part of this lineage, adapting the basic sewing skills my grandmother taught me as a child within my art education. My grandmother found inspiration for patterns in books or designed her own precise depictions of flowers. Her linens were always appropriately starched and ironed to perfection. I am drawn to the softness of fabrics that have lost their stiffness and begin to flop and drape. I am excited by the accumulation of folds in a piece of fabric— traces of the different sizes it has held in order to travel or fit into a space; the folds show signs of suitcase dimensions and the even stack on the shelf it lived on with all the others. My embroidery follows a more bumbling and open line, influenced by a preference for implied-line drawings that can be completed by the eye.

### **Transnational Habitus**

I am not myself without Romania. Likewise, I am not myself without the United States. However, the relationships are different. The magnetic field is uneven — Romania pulls me in now with an uncertainty and with felt gaps in understanding. At age seven, I visited Romania for the first time since leaving as an infant and met my extended family. After that first trip, my parents would send me on my own to stay with my grandparents for most of summer vacation. These annual visits were fundamental to my upbringing as my parents and I were the only family members in the United States. Everyone else was in Romania. Although my parents and I had always spoken Romanian with each other and our home life was deeply planted in their Romanian upbringing, these blocks of time in Romania cemented this identity in a new way. I feel indebted to my parents’ commitment to providing this for me. The care my grandparents put into every summer visit became an anchor point in my upbringing. Because it served as a

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<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Norris Harkness, *Romanian Embroidery: a Dying Folk-Art* (Iuliu Maniu Foundation, 1960), 9.

constant, being in Romania prompted deep self-reflection by allowing me to access my past self at different ages, comparing the elapsed growth and differences. Having another realm that barely overlapped with “regular” life gave me the opportunity to become another person if I’d so decided. Realizing I chose to be the same in both worlds was empowering. However, my time in graduate school making this work has made me more aware of the multitude of shifts that occur between these two personal origin points.

“Transnational habitus” is a term adopted by several authors, and I find resonance with the definition by Faith G. Nibbs and Caroline Brettell, who cite Steve Vertovec: “a dual disposition or orientation” of some migrant groups to retain references related to both home and host countries”.<sup>2</sup> In Nibbs and Brettell’s book *Identity and the Second Generation: How Children of Immigrants Find their Space*, they assert that these aspects are embedded in everyday life, “creating a complex ‘bifocal’ frame of cultural configurations — with regard to social ties, views, and potential action”.<sup>3</sup> This is an important framework for the motivations behind the creation of my thesis exhibition, *Parallel Pattern: First Iteration*. When I formally renounced allegiances to Romania through the U.S. Naturalization Oath, it felt unfathomable to deny the “bifocal” view I had always known.

Now that my grandparents are no longer alive, I am beginning to understand my evolving relationship to Romania. This search has taken the form of trying to find a greater context to the pieces of information my family chose to share with me, coupled with the intention of continuing the chain of values they set as an example.

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<sup>2</sup> Faith G. Nibbs and Caroline Brettell, *Identity and the Second Generation: How Children of Immigrants Find Their Space*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2016), 125. This definition is that of Faith G. Nibbs and Caroline Brettell, which references Steve Vertovec’s comments on the concept. Steven Vertovec, “Trends and Impacts of Migrant Transnationalism.” (*Centre on Migration, Policy, and Society*, 2004), 21.

<sup>3</sup> Nibbs and Brettell, *Identity and the Second Generation*, 125.

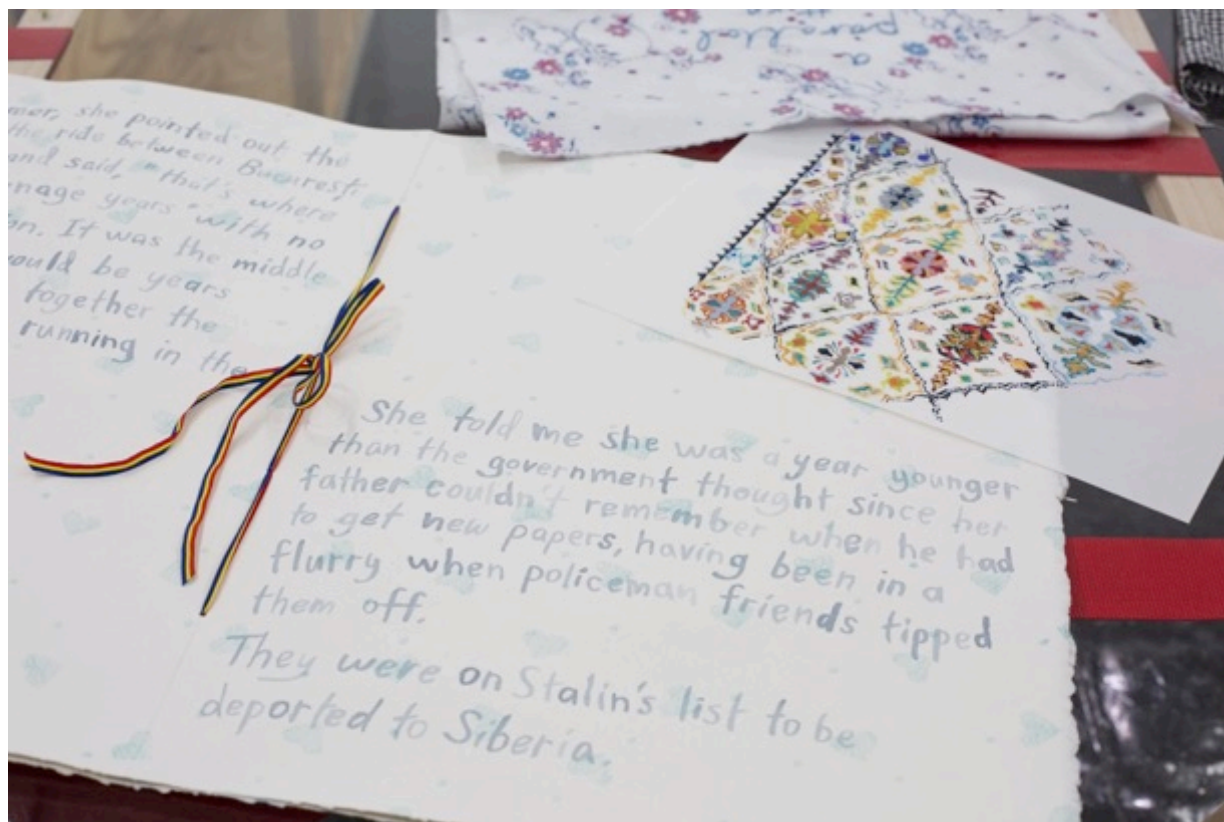


Table view from *Parallel Pattern: Iteration One*, 2019

## Making Home Through Care

“My parent[s] were tasked with the job of survival and I with self-actualization. The immigrant generational gap is real. What a luxury it is to search for purpose, meaning, and fulfillment.”<sup>4</sup>

— Bo Ren

My maternal grandmother moved homes because she was forced to. My parents moved for the hope of more opportunities. In their new home in the United States, my parents found ways to keep ties to Romania through decoration — primarily through macramé and

<sup>4</sup> Bo Ren, Twitter Post, December 1 2017, 2:32 PM. <https://twitter.com/bosefina/>.

embroidered doilies on furniture, and *goblenuri*<sup>5</sup> and paintings hung on walls. These decorations were often either made by family or were gifts from them.

I always felt the immense love my grandmother poured into taking care of her apartment, but I only now understand the importance she must have felt in having control over her own space. It took me several years to piece together her childhood past of being a refugee from *Basarabia*, a territory with a highly contested history. As I describe in one of the works on view in the exhibition:

*With her, things were shared in the kitchen — while beating egg whites and arranging almond slices onto the tops of cakes, raisins soaking in rum extract and paper napkins scented by packets of Dr. Oetker “vanilla-ed” sugar. There were references to places I didn’t know, scattered between the walks to the open-air markets, tv-channel flipping, and balcony chats.*

*The first thing I knew was that she had free public transportation and evening phone calls, but I didn’t know why. One summer, she pointed out the window on the ride between București and Galați and said, “that’s where I spent my teenage years” with no further explanation. It was the middle of nowhere. It would be years until I could piece together the various references to her running in the night.*

*She told me she was a year younger than the government thought since her father couldn’t remember when he had to get new papers, having been in a flurry when policeman friends tipped them off. They were on Stalin’s list to be deported to Siberia.*

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<sup>5</sup> Framed needlepoint tapestries

*They ran to the opposite side of the country and lived there for years until they were taken away by train in the middle of the night. They were dropped off in an empty field and told to start over.*

*I think that's part of why she put so much love into assembling her space. Once she had one, she was going to pour as much of herself into it as possible — for herself and the ones she loved.*

*But, being far meant these connections (beside the much-anticipated summer months) were confined to the suitcase. So she made and sent us doilies and sweaters through others.*

For her, caring for someone was making their surroundings as beautiful and comfortable as possible. For me, as I start to think about where I settle, I've realized that these principles apply to how I make home. Putting together home is extending love and care into the people I share my life with. Regarding the last twenty-one months, this has mostly meant the community of graduate students in our MFA program at VCU. I realize a lot of the gestures of care are ones I learned from the women in my family, or at least were also encouraged by them — making baked goods, handing out flowers for International Women's Day<sup>6</sup>, giving Mărțișor charms<sup>7</sup> for friends to wear in celebration of March 1st.

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<sup>6</sup> My mother would tell me about exchanging flowers for March 8th, and I started doing so in college.

<sup>7</sup> The holiday of March 1st is the first Romanian tradition I remember learning about. In modern celebrations, small charms on red-and-white string are exchanged between friends to celebrate the arrival of spring. Every year, my grandmother would send both me and my mother a charm each to wear on March 1st. She would tape them inside a card for safe-keeping. In 2017, I made a batch of watercolor charms and sent out an open-call to friends that I would send them something in the mail in exchange for a small favor. If they expressed interest and sent their address, they received a charm on traditional thread and a small safety pin, along with instructions to wear it on March 1st and send me a photo of the charm pinned to their shirt. One notable reaction was an artist in Norway who sent me an email glowing over all the luck he had had that day, and he attributed all the creative prosperity to the charm.



The combination of personal investigation in making the work, sharing the work with others, and continuing these familial gestures of care are what have helped me ground myself in shifting understandings of identity and definitions of home. With the women in my family, an attitude prevails: things may not be permanent or ideal, but they can be treated with care. Throughout the hardships of the Communist regime and the Post-Communist landscape, the way forward for them was care into spaces and loved ones.

### **Pop Culture and Information in Romania**

For Romanians in the time of Communism, the opening to the West was primarily in the form of television. As the main source of entertainment, television was a major tool for propaganda and manipulation of its citizens. Nicolae Ceaușescu and his regime controlled the access of information, both through content choice and limited exposure. Petre Mihai Bacanu remarks that “the cultural life was strangled by the political regime”.<sup>8</sup> Children in the Romanian Communist regime were subject to a tiered system of nationalist, educational programming. Pionier (pioneer) was the first step for children growing up in the 70s, starting in second grade, bedecked in a white, navy, and red tie uniform. Television programming was reduced to one channel and lasted only two hours each day, filled to the brim with political propaganda. Music, radio, and television were dominated by praise of Ceaușescu. The airing of popular music and television programming was a tactic in promoting Ceaușescu as an open leader, but these media were in fact deeply monitored and regulated. The regime worked to instill an intense sense of nationalism, focusing on traditional folk music as a conduit. Airing musical broadcasts on

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<sup>8</sup> Rada Cristina Irimie, "Daily Life Under Communism: The Case Of Romania." (SEA: Practical Application of Science II.3 (2014), 274. [http://seaopenresearch.eu/Journals/articles/SPAS\\_3\\_32.pdf](http://seaopenresearch.eu/Journals/articles/SPAS_3_32.pdf).

television served as “the core of the fight against democracy and the West”.<sup>9</sup> By attempting to promote a superior cultural history, the isolating censorship tried to suggest that Romanians already had everything they wanted in the confines of their own country. Furthermore, it implied that outside cultures had become dull and lifeless. This viewpoint of what was outside Romania was carefully crafted by the Communist party, as citizens couldn’t travel or experience it for themselves. Because Ceaușescu was one of the few people who could travel, with his trips documented and aired, Lori Maguire explains that a “divide developed as images became too remote from reality”.<sup>10</sup>

While folk music was openly presented on television, rock music largely represented the spirit of the revolution. In the 1960s, bands like Phoenix managed to embed disguised protest into their songs, blending traditional folklore with ideas from Western cultures.<sup>11</sup> However, as musicians managed to escape to other countries or challenged the government more, the Communist party intervened with explicit repression against them and their loved ones, and ended up eliminating rock music altogether from broadcast. Material associations to rock were prohibited, including clothing. In the regime’s eyes, blue jeans were “signs of Western moral decay”.<sup>12</sup> Youth could be arrested or suspended for wearing them. Because of this censorship, denim became even more desirable, but only accessible by those with connections through the Black Market or family and friends abroad. “Like Coca-Cola cans and chewing-gum, blue jeans reigned supreme as youth’s toughest hard currency”<sup>13</sup>. The symbology of this iconic garment

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<sup>9</sup> Lori Maguire, *The Cold War and Entertainment Television*. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), 221.

<sup>10</sup> Maguire, *The Cold War and Entertainment Television*, 222.

<sup>11</sup> Maguire, *The Cold War and Entertainment Television*, 228.

<sup>12</sup> Maguire, *The Cold War and Entertainment Television*, 229.

<sup>13</sup> Denise Roman. “*Fragmented Identities: Popular Culture, Sex, and Everyday Life in Postcommunist Romania*”, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books), 62.

dubbed Romania's youth of the time as the "Blue Jeans Generation".<sup>14</sup> In my thesis, I refer to this term through the inclusion of a pouch made from a pair of my old jeans. The pouch is slightly trapezoidal—made by following the original pattern of the top half of a pant leg, the back pocket serving as another layer to the container. My jeans denote a more contemporary time, with a dark wash and high amount of stretch. The jeans available in Romania would have been of a much different quality. The pocket bears a three-inch "I shot J.R." pin button, as well as a small enamel pin with the Romanian and European Union flags crossing one another.

### **Strategies of Subversion: Privacy and Parafiction**

There is a generational difference between those who have gone through a particular, storied history, and those who are hearing about it second-hand. Several artists influential to me share a background of living within Eastern European Communism. Their work embodies a variety of strategies in response to the regimes they lived under. Citizens in strict regimes often have restricted access to culture and information, as Rada Cristina Irimie discusses using Romania as an example:

"One direction of falsifying history was to increase the role of the communist party and president Ceaușescu in some historical events. Old books were not available in libraries, exactly for the reason of hiding the past. Even literature was censored. Writers whose works were not 'politically correct' from the communist point of view were not allowed to print their books... because of the strict control over everything that was printed there was a shortage of good books to read or good movies to see, even about themes not related to politics. Even the classic Romanian writers were forbidden".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> I had my parents flip through Denise Roman's chapter on "The Blue Jeans Generation", and they would exclaim with delight over details they had forgotten, feeling seen and having proof that the experiences of their teenage years were part of a collective experience. The mention of VCR parties was of particular note.

<sup>15</sup> Irimie, "Daily Life Under Communism", 274.



Ciprian Mureșan, *All Images from a Book on Holbein*, Graphite on paper, 21 3/16 x 32 1/8 in., 2017, David Nolan Gallery.

Ciprian Mureșan addresses this censorship through his monograph series, in which he creates graphite drawings that summarize the visual contents of a book on one plane. The drawings have a frenetic energy of collecting and cataloguing. The recreations of archive images overlap one another in sections, obscuring information and collapsing a multitude of images in a single field. The titles in the series give insight into his source imagery, such as *All Images from a Book on Giorgio Morandi* (2015). The drawings hold an intimate presence, as they are often similar in size to the pages he is referencing. This act of copying and translating from books reflects Mureșan's own lack of access to information and resources as a student in Communist Romania. The act of reproduction can be seen as an attempt to learn about and connect with the past. In Mureșan's words, "There is this disconnect between ourselves, our present, and the

history that we are supposed to digest.”<sup>16</sup> The driving force behind putting together my thesis exhibition is this exact disconnect — and the attempt to digest it, to understand it, to honor it.

Carrie Lambert-Beatty defines parafiction as “real and/or personages and stories [intersecting] with the world as it is being lived”.<sup>17</sup> Russian-American artist Ilya Kabakov (b.1933) has based his installations in the realm of his reality, while inserting his own fictional characters. Utilizing the structure of parafiction has been a means of survival and escape in a time of artistic censorship and struggle. Kabakov has been able to experience escape vicariously by creating a character that successfully achieves it. Commenting on communal apartments, the artist has said that “it is impossible to live under such conditions, but you can think up a mechanism which can help to make salvation possible.”<sup>18</sup> By having “one foot in the field of the real”<sup>19</sup>, his results are twofold: escape and criticism. “The territory of parafiction,” Lambert-Beatty describes, “at once reveals the way things are and makes sensible the way we want them to be; and which offers experiences of both skepticism and belief”.<sup>20</sup> Kabakov’s installations are effective because he embodies the aesthetics of the original environments, whether it’s the right color for a schoolhouse or original Socialist slogans and posters. After all, “the crucial skill for parafiction is stylistic mimicry”.<sup>21</sup> Borrowing from the real lends credibility, and allows us as viewers to access this potential life.

Even though I myself don’t use parafictional methods in my work, I am very aware of the inadvertent gaps of information present in its content. Stories mutate as they trickle through generations of my family, and I often remember accidentally-altered versions. The stories I share

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<sup>16</sup> Ciprian Mureșan to Juliet Bingham, Email dated January 3rd, 2015, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/muresan-all-images-from-elaine-sturtevant-book-t14498>.

<sup>17</sup> Carrie Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility”, 54.

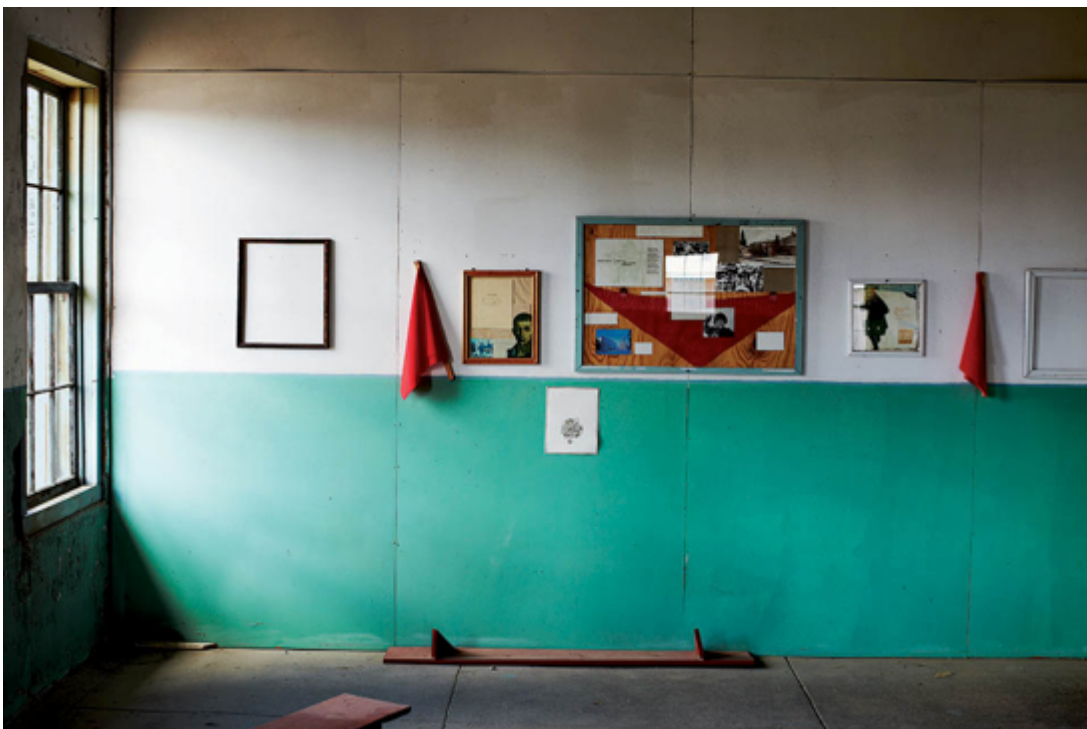
<sup>18</sup> Fine Art Biblio, <https://fineartbiblio.com/artworks/ilya-and-emilia-kabakov/788/the-man-who-flew-into-space-from-his-apartment>.

<sup>19</sup> Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe”, 54.

<sup>20</sup> Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe”, 82.

<sup>21</sup> Lambert-Beatty, “Make-Believe”, 60.

are sincere offerings that I believe to be true, but likely contain changed details. I welcome this uncertainty as a necessary and inevitable component of the process. This attempt at truth comes from the desire to continue the lineage of my family and invite the viewer along on my investigation, picking through what I know and connecting dots with new research. However, I find commonality with artists who use parafiction and set up boundaries as crucial and powerful methods of protection.



Ilya Kabakov, *School No. 6*, 1993, Chinati Foundation.

Kabakov used the setting of the communal apartment as a stage for several characters in works such as “The Man Who Never Threw Anything Away” and “Objects of His Life”. In these installations, clusters of run-down everyday objects and garbage are carefully labelled and catalogued, given the same treatment as priceless artifacts in a museum. By creating characters that handle these items with such care, Kabakov underlines the value of having possessions in a

Soviet society. This aligns with the perception I have of my grandparents and parents, particularly the choices of my maternal grandmother.<sup>22</sup>

In a time of privacy being stripped from its citizens, Kabakov's decision to engage in a private studio practice was a means of establishing control for himself. When a regime increasingly makes private spaces public in the name of communal principle, the artist working in private space is a form of critiquing the government. In this way, an artist enacts their own freedom. Geta Brătescu (1926-2018), a Romanian artist also working in the Soviet era, similarly chose to pour all her energy into the site of the studio. In fact, her subject material often centers around the studio itself. Brătescu related the studio to her version of personal armor against the outside world, stating: "I feel as safe as a warrior in an indestructible tower. My studio, this magic place, will not tolerate everyone".<sup>23</sup> The studio became a place where she could be herself and grow as a person, while also being an idea in and of itself — the studio as "a private space that you're always carrying around with you."<sup>24</sup>

After Brătescu's high school studies, the Communist Party passed a new law prohibiting members of middle-class families to study, and she was forced to leave university.<sup>25</sup> Independent thought was seen as a threat and shutting down education and opportunities of higher education

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<sup>22</sup> Bunica Elena (Grandmother Elena) had rules for how she put together her space. The edges were always considered. They were adorned with crochet lace — she trimmed the edges of her apartment shelves with scalloped borders and ensured that each bedsheet had a patterned perimeter. Windows were set with curtains she'd lovingly selected and put together, and each horizontal surface was tended to with macrame doilies. She had an unspoken rhythm of what the proper ratio of doily to exposed furniture, and I internalized it from her, after summers of beating out doilies from the balcony railing to de-dust, and knowing how to arrange them back in their proper places.

I believe this acute attention and care to her personal environment directly stems both from what she was taught by her family, and the desire of controlling her surroundings when she could. While public space and architecture had a sense of absence and coldness, her personal space could bear warmth and care through her choices.

<sup>23</sup> Geta Brătescu, *Copacul din curtea vecină*. (Bucharest: Fundația Culturală Secolului 21), 245. Translated by Oana Dendorf.

<sup>24</sup> Geta Brătescu, "Interview with Geta Brătescu", interviewed by Dimitrina Sevova, *In Someone Else's Skin*, 2001, <http://xplaces.code-flow.net/sevova-skin/geta-bratescu-en.html>.

<sup>25</sup> Gabriela Gantenbein, "Play of Forms", *Textures of Thought*, (Vienna: Passagen Verla, 2015).

was seen as prevention of revolt. The studio then additionally represented opportunities for greater intellectual independence.<sup>26</sup> In her film, “The Studio (1978)”, Brătescu turns her work space into a stage and delineates a space by using her body measurements. This region becomes the dimensions for performative actions of her daily schedule and routine of drawing. For the film “Towards White (1975)”, she slowly covers everything in her studio with layers of white paper, until everything is concealed. She concludes by veiling herself in white fabric and white face paint. The end result is a complete transformation and obliteration of information. The seesaw continuously moves from public to private in what the artist chooses to reveal and keep for herself. As Catherine de Zegher remarks, “the binary thinking of life/art, subject/object, real/abstract, public/private is undone [in] the studio, which is at once Brătescu’s domestic and artistic space of creation”.<sup>27</sup>



Geta Brătescu, *Towards White (Către alb)*, 1975, Collection of the National Museum of Contemporary Art Bucharest.

<sup>26</sup> Gabriela Gantenbein, “Play of Forms”, *Textures of Thought*, (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2015).

<sup>27</sup> Catherine de Zegher, “A Studio of One’s Own”, File Note #109 Geta Brătescu: The Studio: A Tireless, Ongoing Space, Camden Arts Centre, 2016.



Another strategy for artists working against censorship was changing context in order to slip through the cracks. While an artist may choose to show their work publicly and appear to comply with socialist guidelines, opposition is expressed by embedding subversive elements. Romanian artist Dan Perjovschi is well-known for his large-scale installations of drawings, often drawn directly on the walls or floors of galleries and museums. Before the Romanian Revolution of 1989, Perjovschi started changing his work in order to get by censorship committees, but also to work against the “status quo of paintings of flower pots and apple baskets”.<sup>28</sup> He was able to avoid the preferred subjects of art by the way he presented his work to officials. He invented a new language of drawing through simple characters, and intended to conceal their meanings through a large body of work. When prompted on the meaning of the drawings, he would say they were about society and talk until they yielded and said: “There is nothing dangerous in this one”. Perjovschi notes that they never actually looked closely to realize the embedded stories. In this way, he was able to form a “cache” and “keep his art alive under the conditions”.<sup>29</sup> Perjovschi was also able to get by the Iron Curtain and share his work outside of Romania by mailing work to foreign artists.<sup>30</sup> Even though he was not able to travel, his work managed to be exhibited in other countries by post. While he is now known for his open critique of government and aspects of society, Perjovschi says that he only blatantly started fighting the dictatorship after it was over.<sup>31</sup>

Last May, I visited Muzeul Național de Artă Contemporană in București for the first time and saw several portraits of Ceaușescu, some with his wife Elena. Clearly all done by the same artist, they mostly were large square formats and painted in a flat and sketched-in manner. One

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<sup>28</sup> Andreea Pocotila, “The Romanian Artist Protesting Authoritarianism with Doodles”, Vice, [https://www.vice.com/en\\_uk/article/8gk33a/profile-dan-perjovschi-876](https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/8gk33a/profile-dan-perjovschi-876).

<sup>29</sup> Dan Perjovschi, “Utopia and Reality” interviewed by Peter Engelmann, *Textures of Thought*, (Vienna: Passagen Verlag, 2015).

<sup>30</sup> Pocotila, “The Romanian Artist”.

<sup>31</sup> Pocotila, “The Romanian Artist”.

portrait of note featured a three-quarter view of Ceaușescu placed off-center with an awkward lean, isolated in a flat field of soft blue. I was struck by these works, having never seen paintings of Ceaușescu before. The qualities of the portraits were confounding — I wasn't sure if the artist had portrayed his subjects sincerely or ironically. They occupied an ambiguous in-between — safe enough to pass, but with enough strange stillness to perhaps avoid certain praise and adoration. Not seeing any curatorial didactics, I was uncertain about the context in which they had been painted. Given that they were being shown in the National Contemporary Museum in 2018, I thought they might be made after Ceaușescu's death but then noted they were mostly made in the 80s. The surrounding walls revealed disparate works made by the same artist, including book installations, a multi-chambered wooden box entitled "Image Generator (1972), and dozens of abstract collages, revealing a two-sided approach to his work. Ion Bitzan made commissions under the Communist Party while pursuing his own wide-reaching practice with fervor.<sup>32</sup> Making an authorized body of work allowed him the means to have freedom in his private studio life, which was now being shared in a thorough retrospective. The ambiguous tone of the portraiture in conjunction with his other works was compelling, and I am interested in how artists play with incompleteness both in terms of information and formal qualities.



Ion Bitzan, *Meeting for Peace*, 1987.

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<sup>32</sup> Ghiu, Daria. "Ion Bitzan", Artforum, <https://www.artforum.com/picks/national-museum-of-contemporary-art-mnac-74221>.

## Teleportation through Color

Rewriting history was one of Ceaușescu's main aims, and another strategy was changing the physical landscape of the country<sup>33</sup> — demolishing the old and inserting the new Soviet style in its place, stripping people of their roots and attempting to establish Communist history as the only one.<sup>34</sup> Maguire hypothesizes that these deep, psychological tactics may account for why it has been so difficult for Romanians to shake out of a mentality of survival since the Revolution.<sup>35</sup> I would theorize that the lasting city architecture of endless blocks of stacked concrete apartments plays a large role in this maintained attitude. My three grandparents lived in such apartments in Galați (where I was born), with the sweet coincidence and convenience of being a five-minute-walk apart from each other. The neighboring building of my paternal grandparents' block was painted a soft, warm orange when the phone carrier *Orange* moved in on the ground floor around 2000, but my maternal grandmother's block had a pastel, minty blue-green theme from the start when it was built in the '60s. I believe these paint decisions were moves to soften and reclaim the sanctity of private living spaces.

After my maternal grandmother's death at the beginning of my second semester in graduate school, details of her living spaces kept coming to mind. The loss compelled me to find a way of bringing her closer to me, as well as her beloved apartment. My grandmother reserved certain stacks of linens for the summer months when we visited. My towels were indicated with an embroidered 'D', usually in red, in one of the corners. I always knew that the light blue one

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<sup>33</sup> One of Ceaușescu's most prominent building decisions is the Palace of Parliament. It is the second-largest administration building in the world, outsized only by the Pentagon. I think of it as a massive, brutal wedding cake dropped in the capital. Because the building's construction was ordered by Ceaușescu, to many, it represents his hypocritical approach of extreme opulence in the face of scarcity.

<sup>34</sup> Maguire, *The Cold War and Entertainment Television*, 225.

<sup>35</sup> Maguire, *The Cold War and Entertainment Television*, 226.

with vases and yellow flowers was meant for my feet, and not anyone else's.<sup>36</sup> This particular sense of feeling cared for on an individual level felt like an applicable transfer in re-organizing my studio space for myself and visitors. I decided to re-paint my studio floor and one wall, as well as provide slippers for each member of my committee and my peers in the Painting + Printmaking Department.

I went to Lowe's to pick out paint chips for the right colors. My grandmother's outdoor balcony is one of my favorite places in the world, and I needed to get it right. On the outside, it's just one of many worn-down, concrete enclosures of the countless *blocuri* (blocks) that define much of the architecture in Romanian cities. But inside, it was filled with plants and flowers, and lovingly framed with a large, white linen curtain that she made, mended, and replaced over the years.

The balcony is painted in the range of the minty blue-green that cloaks sections of the entire building, a color that travels in doses throughout the rest of her apartment. The color shifts in the changing light, but would also actually alter every couple years as my grandmother would add a fresh coat after the months exposed to snow. She would bring a literal chip of the balcony plaster into the paint shop for them to mix for her, but she always said they didn't have much control with getting the ratio right.<sup>37</sup> Each version was in the same color family, but the hues varied enough to make me sometimes notice a difference or doubt if I was remembering the color correctly between summers. In my own process of choosing a color, I was lost in focused

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<sup>36</sup> This practice is nodded to with the warm cream embroidered initials, "J.R." in the top right corner of the wall drawing.

<sup>37</sup> When she painted her bedroom a color she called "banana", she noted that it turned out quite differently than what she had ordered. When I implied that shouldn't be acceptable, she shrugged. It reminded me of how shocked she was at customer service in the United States when she visited in 1996. When the McDonald's drive-thru made a mistake, they sincerely apologized and gave us free fries. My grandmother couldn't believe it, and my parents explained typical American return policies to her with glee. I always think about how shocking American grocery stores must have been to them and countless other immigrants.

concentration at the store, looking over the many acrylic slats holding variations that were mixed up by machine. I chose one that seemed to be right, recalling a place over five thousand miles away. I painted the short wall of my triangular studio and sections of the adjacent walls to mimic the dimensions of her balcony in Romania. I painted from the floor to the rough measurement of my belly button, based on memory of where the railing hit me and the color ended.

Painting the studio wasn't about creating facsimile. There is no way to make a section of an art building in Richmond into a Danube river view, but it was truly remarkable how the simple abstraction of painting out an area of my walls in that color propelled me there. An area of color in a room that is very unlike the original could be enough to shift the tone of the space and make me feel closer to my grandmother and her apartment. I painted the entire floor a light cream, in a color I referred to as 'vanilla ice cream', to evoke some of the linens in her apartment. The purpose of providing slippers in my studio was two-fold — protecting the newly painted and clean surface that would allow me to work freely on the floor, and extending the gesture of care when an object is reserved and designated for your visits.<sup>38</sup> I ordered a bundle of light, standard white slippers and embroidered both slippers with each person's first initial, using colors that reminded me of that person. The slippers were kept at the door of my studio, to be worn when people took off their shoes to enter. I see this as continuing the example my grandmother set for me— feeling that one has a sustained relationship to a space and its owner, a special recurring invitation.

### **J.R. in Romania**

At the beginning of my second year in the graduate program, I happened to meet three new Romanian acquaintances within a week. All three women exclaimed with surprise over

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<sup>38</sup> I was also raised to never wear shoes indoors. The custom of wearing shoes indoors is another perplexing one to my family.

how well I spoke Romanian for someone who grew up in the United States. Their remarks reminded me of a time when I was told I have a “neutral” Romanian accent. My dad and I were at a button and trim booth in Galați’s market, and the shopkeeper told us she loved the way we spoke. She claimed that it was hard to trace what region my dad was from (“Galați”, he said, and she was stunned), and that my accent was neutral. This memory was the starting point of a text I wrote in English. I let the writing be a fluid process, tracing ruminations on perceptions of my accent when I’m in Romania versus the United States to other first impressions of people and places. I recall that I was often met with “Who shot J.R.?” in Romania as a leading question when I said I lived in Dallas. Seeing as I was only eight when I was first asked this and didn’t know about the soap opera *Dallas*, I was confused about whether they meant J.F.K.

Remembering that this was such a wide-spread reaction in Romania, I was curious about the strong hold this cheesy television program had on its citizens. *Dallas* was the only American show shown during the time of Communism<sup>39</sup>, an unexpected choice considering the tight grip the regime had on cultural imports. Supposedly it was shown because Ceaușescu thought it depicted capitalism in such an obviously bad way that Romanians would be grateful for their means of living.<sup>40</sup> Instead, it instilled a colorful, liberated view of America and imprinted as a lasting mental image. Larry Hagman even used to claim that he was a major inspiration for the 1989 Revolution that overthrew Ceaușescu.<sup>41</sup> The discovery of this Romania-Texas connection was a delightfully strange surprise, and made its way into the writing for my audio piece. The text relates this parallel to my memories of taking my grandparents to Southfork Ranch, the site

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<sup>39</sup> Scott Roxborough, “Berlin Hidden Gems: How TV's 'Dallas' Toppled Romanian Communism”, The Hollywood Reporter, <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/hotel-dallas-shows-how-tv-865438>.

<sup>40</sup> Roxborough, “Berlin Hidden Gems”.

<sup>41</sup> “How I brought down Ceausescu: Larry Hagman who played Texas oil baron JR Ewing , claims Romania’s decision to screen Dallas toppled Communist Rulers”, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1388776/Larry-Hagman-claims-Romanias-decision-screen-Dallas-toppled-communist-rulers.html>.

where the exterior scenes of *Dallas* were filmed, when the two of them visited when I was four years old. The writing weaves personal memories of how information was shared between women in my family against the political backdrop of *Dallas*' impact in Romania, concluding with how my grandmother would often relate to me how she watched Ceaușescu and his wife's executions on live television.

I recorded myself translating this piece of writing into Romanian in real-time, stumbling along when I wasn't quite sure how to convert a turn of phrase. I initially presented this to my peers in the form of a file: Romanian audio accompanying a black screen with English translation captions. The response to this new method of explicit storytelling was so exciting that I decided to incorporate more storytelling in my work, including paintings and drawings.

In the thesis exhibition, the Romanian audio is played through wireless headphones and its English captions are projected onto the bottom third of a linen drawing that is tacked to the wall. The source imagery is a childhood photo of me, my mother, and grandfather standing in front of the iconic house at Southfork Ranch, and is depicted in colored pencil and soft washes of acrylic.



*J.R. (Southfork Ranch)*, Acrylic and colored pencil on linen blend, 2018, Photo by Terry Brown.

Shortly after writing the video text last fall, I discovered through Livia Ungur and Sherng-Lee Huang's experimental film, *Hotel Dallas (2016)* that there is a replica of the Southfork ranch house that was built in Romania. This prompted a decision to revisit the original house at Southfork Ranch when I was back in the Dallas area. In December I attended a busy tour group, noting that there were two Romanian families on the time slot before mine. The whole experience was oddly surreal, as I knew next to nothing about the plot or characters. I wrongly thought that J.R. died in the legendary second season cliffhanger, not realizing he actually survived until I was informed in our tour guide's presentation. I was mostly invested in visiting the actual space, measuring it up against the dozens of film photos I knew from family albums and imagining what it must have seemed like to my grandparents, thrown in with the already larger-than-life experience of Texas. I barely heard any English amongst the tourist families, which seemed to demonstrate the global cultural impact of the television series as it spread a mythology of ubiquitous oil tycoons and big-haired queens.

### **Translations and Language**

My use of the Romanian language was grounded solely in my family or social situations, whether it was holiday parties within the community of Romanian families in North Texas, or the interactions I had in Romania as a child. Beyond basic descriptions, speaking in Romanian didn't overlap with speaking about art. I imagined giving an artist lecture in Romanian, and realized that it would seem out of place.

As an exercise, I decided to test this out within the context of the Pecha Kucha introductions that take place in the Department of Painting + Printmaking each fall. Midway through my short allotted time, I switched from speaking in English to speaking in Romanian. It felt remarkable. Certainly this feeling was mostly due to speaking to a whole audience who



largely couldn't understand what I was saying, but it also felt familiar and foreign all at once.<sup>42</sup> It felt appropriate to talk about my grandparents in Romanian, but injecting loose and playful descriptive language took more thought. It's easy to develop certain phrases when talking about a body of work, but I didn't have those in Romanian. Although I grew up speaking both English and Romanian, English overpowered the other given my environment and thus is a primary language. Although the artist Do Ho Suh's native language is not English, we share common experience regarding speaking about our work:

“And ironically, I had never talked about my art in Korean before. Even though my English is not good, I think I feel more comfortable actually talking about my work in English than in Korean. That's something that I find interesting. So, when I give a lecture in Korea, for example, I realize myself actually translating my thoughts in English into Korean. “

— Do Ho Suh <sup>43</sup>

Studies suggest that bicultural-bilingualism instills flexibility in shifting circumstances, due to living between cultural contexts and different ways of expression.<sup>44</sup> This can also complicate one's sense of identity. Author and researcher Charlotte Burck uses her own experience between Holland, Canada, and Britain as an example, stating: “when I am pressed to define myself this shifts depending on the context”.<sup>45</sup> Reflecting on my childhood now, I do better sense the swinging pendulum of displacement between Romania and the United States,

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<sup>42</sup> Save for one recent Romanian undergraduate transfer student in the audience, which I joked served as extra accountability that I was in fact taking this seriously.

<sup>43</sup> Do Ho Suh, “Seoul Home/L.A. Home—Korea and Displacement”, Interview with Do Ho Suh, *Art 21*, art21.org, November 2011, <https://art21.org/read/do-ho-suh-seoul-home-la-home-korea-and-displacement/>.

<sup>44</sup> Francois, Grosjean. “Change of Language, Change of Personality?”, *Psychology Today*, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/life-bilingual/201111/change-language-change-personality>.

<sup>45</sup> Charlotte Burke, *Multilingual Living: Explorations of Language and Subjectivity*, (Basington, UK: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), 160.

and the shifts that seemed to occupy each. In Romania, I felt insecurities around butchering the complicated grammar of the language outside of my immediate family and not feeling like a “real” Romanian.<sup>46</sup> In the United States, the sense of a “complete home” felt evasive. However, similar to feeling at home in both the original Latin pronunciation of my name and the one I unknowingly “Americanized”, it feels essential to have regular use of both languages.

The English and Romanian languages each have their own absurdities. English spelling and pronunciation lack rational correlation (why do dough, cough, through not rhyme?) and Romanian is a minefield of conjugations and confusing language gender assignments — including the so-called “neuter” (why is a singular noun masculine but then feminine in plural?). Growing up in the United States and attending school here obviously gave me much more exposure to the English language — lending the ease of knowing what is correct without having to think about it. I grew up speaking Romanian at home with my parents, but my understanding and skill with the language deepened once I started visiting my non-English-speaking grandparents on my own in the summers.

Romanian is a phonetic language, and thus reading and writing come about fairly simply if one knows how to speak it. However, I am still plagued with mistakes — both new and repeat offenders. I will insist to my parents that a particular conjugation just doesn’t sound right, even though I know it’s correct. They will laugh because they’re so used to it that it never occurred to them, just like how I don’t understand how they can’t quite articulate the difference between pronouncing “ear” and “year” in English. We are factors of what is our original, our first. My parents ensured I would be exposed to their mother tongue in order to communicate with my other family who didn’t speak English, but also I imagine, to be able to speak with them as they feel most comfortable. It always feels like I see an additional layer to them when we are all in

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<sup>46</sup> I cringe when I hear audio of myself speaking in Romanian — more so than when I hear myself in English.

Romania together — a certain openness and ease that is coupled with going back to their home country. A couple months ago, I watched Harun Farocki's *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), which uses amateur video and televised footage to piece together an outlook of Romania's 1989 Revolution. Despite the fact that the clips and details of the overthrow were entirely new to me and very much outside of my experience, watching a documentary that is primarily based in Romanian sent me into a confusing state of comfort. Hearing conversations in Romanian could somehow give a sense of home, despite the tragedy and horror of the subject matter.

When I was studying in London during my undergraduate degree, I stayed in a dormitory for international students and first-years. Upon hearing I was Romanian in friendly introductions, dozens of people excitedly told me there was another Romanian student in the building and wanted to jump in to get us to meet. We kept missing each other for the next days, which built up such an anticipation for fellow residents that a whole hallway actually cheered when we met. Ștefan immediately swept me up in a big hug, and stated how incredible it was to get to speak in Romanian with someone else. It left an impact on me that I could provide such immediate comfort and joy simply through language, despite the fact that I hadn't even grown up where he had.

I feel at home in both pronunciations of my name: the one I was given, and the one I unknowingly gave myself as a child, adapting to American accents.

It's not something I really realized until much later than you'd think - the way I changed it in English versus the one of home life and family friends.

They both deeply mean home. I am at home <sup>when</sup> a friend corrects someone else for calling me the Princess Diana variety. I am at home with the original pronunciation of two syllables.

But I've recently realized the ~~deeply~~ very warm & intimate sense of a non-Romanian friend calling me by the Latin way. They're usually other graduate students who are Romance-language speakers, my name tumbling out effortlessly. It's a moment of home that blooms in my stomach, in the middle of the hallway or at the foot of the stairs.

It's like the strange, immediate intimacy that I grew up feeling with many other immigrants of various generations. ~~It makes sense to me now, thinking of my childhood and my parents' first years in the United States.~~

I grew up within an extended community of international graduate students who fed me precious sweets they'd gotten from home, inviting us in and showing their customs of hospitality.

Home was made in the sharing.

My notes for the hand-painted text that wraps around the walls of *Parallel Pattern*: First Iteration.

### **Material Relationships in *Parallel Pattern: First Iteration***

The gallery installation of my thesis exhibition is comprised of three main parts: a) the linen Southfork Ranch drawing and its accompanying Romanian audio playing through wireless headphones with the projected English captions; b) two luggage-rack tables of my own design that bear several folio elements, largely based in textiles and paper; c) a wide band of minty, blue-green house-paint that runs along the U-shape of the three main walls of the gallery, spanning from the bottom lip to my belly-button height (a remembered measurement taken from where the wall of my grandmother's balcony hits me).<sup>47</sup> Strings of hand-painted wall text interact with the border where mint wall paint meets white.

The bottom section of cream fabric on the Southfork Ranch drawing houses the white, projected captions. The horizon line of the drawing, where shades of green colored pencil meets bare fabric, lines up with the border of mint green and white paint, inverting the color relationship.

The two identical luggage-rack tables run parallel to one another, running across the length of the room. Each of the tables consists of a base of three wood-frame luggage racks that open in an 'x' formation and are secured with five lengths of red webbing. The webbing stretches across the tops, setting their width. The three racks are connected with loose loops of more red webbing, creating the illusion of a continuing line, and extending the five stripes in an undulation of taut tension and floppy rest. The table top is a half-inch sheet of clear plexiglass, fastened to the wooden racks with countersunk brass screws. The tables are intended for mobility and travel. The plexi-glass top is dismantled after unscrewing eight points, and the racks fold

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<sup>47</sup> While the painted band is a gesture to evoke my maternal grandmother's balcony, I also view a secondary reference layer to Ilya Kabakov's "School No. 6" at Chinati Foundation in Marfa, Texas. As an undergraduate student, I was a volunteer gallery attendant for this installation during their 25th Anniversary weekend.

into themselves for easy storage. I intend for the racks to be reconfigured for future spaces — they can be rearranged as a solo rack, or a set of two, three, six, etc.



View of luggage-rack tables in installation of *Parallel Pattern: Iteration One*.

The tops of the tables hold a variety of works made during my time in graduate school. The largest measures to twenty-two by thirty inches; the smallest fits in the palm of my hand. Viewers are invited to touch and handle the folio elements through the exhibition text and the example of others. Many of the objects prompt unfolding, turning of pages, or retrieving the contents of fabric pouches with pinched fingers. The table elements are comprised of a variety of two-dimensional media: silkscreen, colored pencil, acrylic, watercolor, and thread are used on both paper and found and gifted fabric.

I attempt to connect separate table works through choice of materials, depictions, and written content. Depending on the level of engagement and the order in which a viewer interacts with the work, the content and narrative elements are shuffled and rearranged in multiple orientations. Reflecting my own process of sorting through the generational narratives of my



family's history and connecting dots, I wink at the viewer by making shared references in separate objects. A braid of dried Texan grass bends across one table, alluding to the story of my grandfather teaching me to braid that is revealed in the contents of a different pouch. I view many of these relationships in pairs, separate pieces that connect across the two tables.

I view this body of work as the first iteration of many. New folio elements will be introduced as I make more connections, and different iterations will feature various combinations of table-top works. I intend to make a clamshell box to house the entire collection of folio elements created within this body of work.



View of mixed media elements on one of the tables, 2019.

As the folio elements are moved around on the plexiglass surface, they interact with the luggage-rack infrastructure underneath, and flashes of red and built angles shift in and out of view. Without fail, I have found the drawings and pouches on the tables rearranged and tidied at perpendicular angles each time I returned. Alone in the gallery, I can coax them out of the grid

and overlap their edges. In the studio, I constantly rearrange their order and spatial relationships, observing how they affect one another. Straight lines of the luggage-rack tables are softened by the rounded corners of linen pockets and textile folds. I hope to suggest inquiry by arranging the objects at askew angles, both signaling past handling and inviting touch. It's amusing that the assumption is that their original orientation must mimic the more standard museum orientations of ordered vitrines; this may be due to expectation that the orderly is the original, or perhaps the effect of constantly seeing staged arrangements through social media. Occasionally, I have come back to sweet new visual arrangements, slight differences that would signal someone's touch in my absence. The postage twine on the envelope might be twisted in a loopy coil, or translucent linen might be covering the peasant-woman screenprint in a beautiful way I hadn't considered on my own.

### **Bifurcation**

One of the objects on the luggage rack tables is a 8x10 inch print of a cell phone photo I took on my grandmother's balcony. The picture plane is layered with a sheer, light-blue fabric on top, flocked with small staggered polka-dots. The textile is secured to the print with a single running stitch that divides the photo in half, aligning with the edge of the mint balcony wall. This sewn line makes it so that the entire photo can only be seen at once through the sheer blue veil. Viewers can lift an edge of the fabric and reveal the bare image only one half at a time. This print proved to be one of the elements that held viewers' attention the most — some expressed frustration at not being able to see both halves at once, while others appreciated the framing device of focusing on one half at a time to notice abstracted shape and color. Splitting serves as a formal device and metaphor in expressing the space in between the straddle of two points, an amorphous space of immigrant experience.



The orientation of the two plexiglass tables themselves is meant to mirror my split experience, running parallel to each other but staggered — a bridge of connection formed by its tabletop contents that depend on one another to provide a more complete context. As Brettell and Nibbs note, recent research suggests that “members of the second generation no longer choose to emphasize one identity over the other; rather these identities are more fluid and multifaceted”, even claiming an “emotional transnationalism” that exists without having access to transnational social relationships.<sup>48</sup> I identify with these sentiments, as my work clearly demonstrates deeply embedded ties to Romania and its woven associations, despite no longer having the relationship of my grandparents in Galați.



View of bifurcated print, fabric and thread on print, 2019.

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<sup>48</sup> Nibbs and Brettell, *Identity and the Second Generation*, 125.

### **Translation: Thoughts on *The Woman with Five Elephants***

The documentary *The Woman with Five Elephants* (2009) follows a translator, Svetlana Geier, who is of Ukrainian descent and immigrated to Germany as a young woman. The film shows, amongst clips of her work translating Russian texts into German and sharing personal anecdotes, her return to Ukraine after several years. Many scenes in the film felt deeply related to both the material and conceptual underpinnings in my work. Below are some of my notes while watching the film:

As she is ironing, Svetlana says:

“when one washes a fabric, its threads lose its orientation.

One has to help the thread, really, to retrieve its exact orientation.

This is a woven fabric— that is the text and the textile.

They have the same root, too. There is always one thread within several threads.”

Svetlana unfolds other linens from a drawer and notes what her mother made, marveling over the work one does to calculate the pattern in their head.

“when you draw out the threads, it has to be exact, not one thread more, not one less, otherwise the pattern doesn’t work afterwards.

One first breaks the textile, then one fills it out.

Such things are very human.”

To me, these are beautiful and resonant ways of relating text and textiles.

This is a guiding principle of bridging the conceptual and the material in my work.

When asked if she had a reason for not going to the Ukraine for all these years, Svetlana says:

“it’s the other way round. I had no reason to go.”

This moment stopped me in my tracks because it related to my fear  
of what would happen to annual visits after my grandparents passed.  
How do we maintain our relationships to places when the foundation has so fundamentally  
changed?

On her work: “a translation is not a caterpillar crawling from left to right, a translation always emerges from the whole. Do you understand? One has to make the text entirely one's own.”

“Why do people translate? It is the yearning for something that keeps escaping. For the unrivaled original, for the final, the essential.”

When I was translating my English text into Romanian in real-time, I felt the pressure  
of the recording. I felt worry that it didn't have the spirit of the original writing  
or that the pauses and breaks were incompatible, and awkward.  
However, the stumbling feels appropriate to the process and the incompatibility I sometimes feel  
in switching between languages. There are certain turns of phrase that feel impossible to  
replicate. In speaking either language, I often want to use something from the other, but cannot  
carry the full range of subtlety, beauty, and depth. I have felt this camaraderie when speaking  
with bilingual peers in my time here.

### **Original vs. Reproduction**

In terms of feeling at home, when will a substitute suffice, and when is the original the only acceptable option? Immigrants are constantly searching for adaptations.

A hunger may be satisfied with an adjacent equivalent, and along with it, bring new allegiances through the fondness for a neighboring solution. To some, getting *dolmas* from a Greek joint can curb a craving for *sarmale*. To others, only the real thing will do. Our family's annual sampling

of *sarmale* is typically served at the annual Christmas dinner of close Romanian ex-pat family friends. One Christmas, our friends had managed to get pickled cabbage leaves from the Russian deli<sup>49</sup> before they were cleared out, reinforcing the deep ties other immigrants felt in recreating traditions of places where they no longer lived.

The question of the reproduction versus the original is present in the objects I made for the tables. Most of the time, I make things that have qualities taken from source imagery, either through painting a recreation of a textile or lifting a color from another place. Sometimes, the original object is present in the room; this occurs with a couple of original family linens and vanilla sugar packets that I have from stashing them in my suitcase on my way back from Romania.



Jean pocket pouch on top of J.R. and J.F.K. drawing, 2019.

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<sup>49</sup> We often get Romanian wine from the local Russian deli. The deli owner comments on the large Romanian community and the high demand for imported goods. There's a certain delight in seeing the actual language in the packaging print. While it is often possible to get a nearly identical product from Bulgaria or other Eastern European countries, the added detail of exact branding can often bring about a deeper sense of home. Products are often packaged for distribution in much of Europe, and a larger label swimming in tiny print is adhered on top of the original writing. It was a reflex of comfort, scanning for the tiny "Ro" listed in an oval before the instructions and ingredients, nestled in between the other usual geographical suspects.

## Coping through humor: Banana Mâine

During the communist regime, the staple food supply was nearly halved, and other living essentials were restricted.<sup>50</sup> Diet staples were strictly rationed, and citizens' lives revolved around standing in line for their share.

*My grandparents and I were out fishing with my godparents when I was about nine. They were offering me a snack, and maybe I wasn't so sure about the deep brown spots on a banana. My godmother heartily jumped in with a laugh, "banana mâine! (banana tomorrow!)" I looked at her, confused, and she eagerly recounts a story of her son and his friends. From what I can remember, the whole account was her son had the rare treat of being gifted a banana. She would remind him that he had the banana to eat, and each day he would exclaim that he was saving the banana for tomorrow, considering it was such a rarity. His desire to extend the pleasure pushed the banana past its peak potential.*

*After her story, we would all revel in using the phrase, saving our bananas for tomorrow. It is now a clear example to me of the indispensable role of humor in survival. They had suffered through so much uncertainty and hardship, but turned to levity whenever possible. My first understanding of food rations was my mother showing me a photo of her with Santa Claus at the bank, her mother's workplace. She commented that the bundle in her hand contained two oranges — she remembered because it had been so special.*

*In the words of my dad, would you rather I cry than laugh?*

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<sup>50</sup> I often had a confused sense of history based on the fragments my mom and her mother shared with me. Considering the bulk of the first years I was alone with my grandparents, I had to later try to confirm with my mother when I got home if I remembered correctly. I didn't understand why my mother studied for her university exams by oil lamp. I'd only seen that in really old movies.

Visiting my grandparents every summer, I heard all three of them speak so overwhelmingly of the origin of fruit at the market that I thought it must be something everyone did. There was a clear hierarchy of Romanian-grown fruit over fruit imported from elsewhere. While this can be a healthy view of the importance of consuming local produce, upon further reflection this also felt like a manifestation of national pride. While Romania's economy and quality of living Post-Communism may still be corrupt and considered to be inferior, they could assert that the soil did produce better-tasting strawberries than those from Spain. Growing up in the United States, I was so accustomed to fruit coming from all over the world, imported for citizens' year-long blueberry cravings. I hadn't questioned this as a child until I saw how bewildering it was for my grandparents. This would seem to be a manifestation of what Ruxandra Trandafoiu argues is a Romanian attitude: a complicated paradox of simultaneous inferiority and superiority of national identity, located within the domain of produce.<sup>51</sup> In other instances, my family both wanted to communicate the hardships and problems the country continued to face, but also ensure I was proud of where I was from. My grandmother used to tell me how Bucuresti was known throughout Europe as "micul Paris", or "Little Paris". She would remind me at intervals, as if to provide proof that Romania was considered impressive to people of more widely-respected nations. For me, summer's produce was a big part of my time in Romania and reflected our passing time together as we ate strawberries, cherries, peaches and apricots, and then caught some of the early watermelon if I was lucky. Cherries were so much cheaper in Romania than the United States, and I'd often eat them at every meal. My maternal grandmother would dry the stems to make tea, and I got into the habit of separating the stems in a neat stack away from the pits on her tiny china plates. I find myself still doing this after her death, a maintained habit of consideration. One nickname for the month of June is a diminutive

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<sup>51</sup>Ruxandra Trandafoiu, *Diaspora Online: Identity Politics and Romanian Migrants*, (New York: Berghahn Books, 2013), 28.

of “cherry”, and my maternal grandmother would always say with delight that she loved seeing cherries start to appear at the market, because that meant I was coming home soon too.

### **On Sharing**

I am an only child. Both of my parents are as well. In our case, this resulted in a close family unit. I grew up with my parents in Texas, and had annual visits with my three grandparents. My grandparents all had siblings, so we have some extended family thanks to that generation. The double whammy of being the only grandchild and living abroad from them meant that our summer weeks together were precious in passing down information. My grandparents took it upon themselves to try to teach me everything they could about Romania the one time of year we were together. Considering the censorship that dominated my grandparents’ lives as they raised my parents, it makes sense to me that they attempted to share as much as possible. My parents themselves still don’t understand the full histories and implications because the communist regime made information scarce. Their education was altered by the Communist agenda.

Being the only descendant carries a sense of responsibility. I am the only one to carry the name (a more unusual variation of the more common *Anto*hi), and my parents ensured that I would learn Romanian through them and my grandparents. Sharing what they have taught me is a commitment that feels like a dual-purpose promise. By continuing the chain they started before me, I uphold their values. By sharing them with others, it produces a territory of exchange and open conversations. These conversations often lead me to form new connections between old memories and discussion fragments, leaving me feeling more grounded.



Installation view of *Parallel Pattern: Iteration One*, 2019.



## On Offering and Exchange

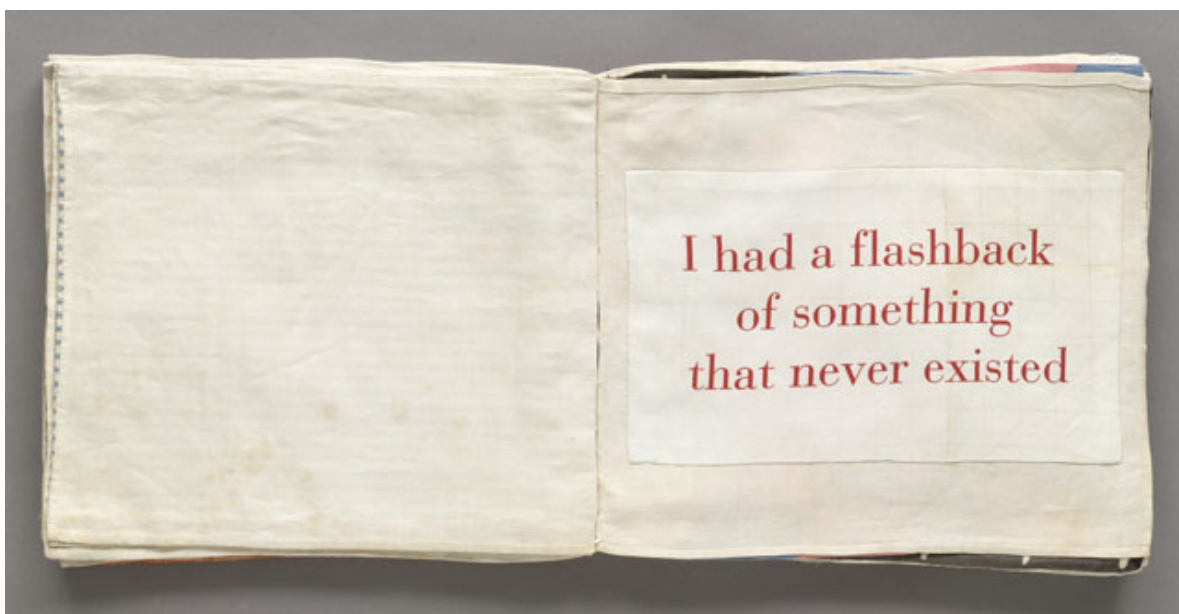
My grandparents would save fabric, gold, and fish for my summer visits. Nice linen was saved until I could be there for a tailor to take my measurements, scraps of gold tucked into a paper envelope were put aside until I could page through a foreign catalogue and point to something as a reference for a jeweler, and scrumbie fish were frozen and stored, later to be thawed in the summer heat and put on the grill for lunch and dinner. In Texas, we would save the nice clothes I grew out of to bring in our suitcases to Romania for distribution amongst the network of family friends. Our luggage would also be filled with presents that couldn't be found in Romania, both practical and fun.

Both my grandmothers offered all of their textiles to me before they died, specifically for use in the studio or my home, or both. My grandparents and parents continuously set the example of offering as much as you are capable — thoughtful generosity has been a key value in my upbringing. I believe their sense of generosity is present in the textiles they gifted me that I've used in the exhibition.

*Bunica Elena's suitcase — there is a Romanian Orthodox practice of giving linens to less fortunate people when someone dies. My maternal grandmother already had a tidy set prepared for her own death, packaged neatly in an old suitcase. She was considerate and organized even for her departure. We found the suitcase in a back corner of her bedroom, after my mother had already gathered a fresh set of clothing to give away.*

### Louise Bourgeois: Ode à l'Oubli<sup>52</sup>

Last winter, I went to New York to see Louise Bourgeois' retrospective at MoMA. A couple of months prior, I had seen a small selection of her fabric book pages at an off-site location in Chelsea. The gallery was predominantly occupied by a large grid of textile rectangles, all of the same size. Upon closer inspection, the textiles were richly printed photo-scans of saturated pigment stains. In a smaller glass vitrine, two fabric books were opened, resting belly-up on their floppy spines. These two books served as clues in realizing the grid on the other wall must have been components of another book that was now disassembled for display. The sewn edges indicated that the pages were clearly formed from folding fabric in half and doubling up, instead of merely being one layer thick. Although overall delicate and sensitive, this detail gave their construction some serious heft. One book was peppered with small tabs all bearing red numerals, a loving and satisfying method of arranging page numbers.



Louise Bourgeois, *I Had a Flashback of Something that Never Existed*, no. 28, Museum of Modern Art, NY.

<sup>52</sup> “Ode à l'Oubli” (Ode to the Forgotten) is taken from one of Bourgeois' textile book pages in the exhibition.

I yearned to softly turn the pages and feel the weight of its leaves — how the air captured between the folds of the pages would feel in my hands. One of the page spreads on display bore a clock with twenty-four hours accompanied with the text: “All my actions today will aim to avoid the things that I have to do”, and I wondered if there was more. The vitrine display only allowed me a view into one spread, and I wanted to see the rest. I think this desire lodged itself into my subconscious and nestled there for over a year until I began to make work intended for touch. Bourgeois incorporated text within an array of geometric patterns, washes, and textures; she turned to using textiles extensively in the later years of her life, once she decided she could use things in her wardrobe. She cited the powerful memory of fabric, stating “you can... remember your life by the shape, the weight, the color, the smell of the clothes in your closet.”<sup>53</sup> I relate to this as I use linens from my grandmothers’ wardrobes and drawers, but also as I reference the articles of clothing I never got to see — whether they were made and given away or left behind. My maternal grandmother made my mother a silk fringe dress that I only know through photos, a now family legend of the care she put into making something nice for my mother when beautiful things were often so scarce. Textiles are a backbone of storytelling in my family’s history. I look to Bourgeois’ work as an example of the consideration and care I pursue in constructing the elements for the tables.

### **On Portability and Scale**

In piecing together the timeline of my maternal grandmother’s turbulent experience with home and place, I learned that her family had owned a general store in Basarabia. When I asked her what they sold, she alluded to the stock primarily consisting of dry goods and fabric.

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<sup>53</sup> Wall Text, *Louise Bourgeois: An Unfolding Portrait*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, September 24, 2017–January 28, 2018.

The items we still have from my grandmother and her family — those that remained after they had to abandon the store and flee the region — all seem to be textiles. Dorothy Norris Harkness argues that Romania's history of invasions established textiles as the predominant expression of decoration:

The invasions continued well into the nineteenth century — and in a sense through the World Wars of the twentieth — and served to give the Romanians the reputation of nomads, when actually they were a home-loving, peaceful, agricultural folk, fleeing frequent enemies and carrying with them into mountain refuges all their little treasures and household possessions. Obviously rugs, embroideries, and other fabrics were the things that could be transported most easily and with the minimum of damage, so it was this general type of decoration that became characteristically and nationally Romanian.<sup>54</sup>

In the midst of abruptly starting a new life, a couple of textiles were easy to transport across the country and provide a sense of familiarity. The more nomadic one had to be, the more portable the objects, in order to satisfy the need for decoration.<sup>55</sup> This tactic applied both to my grandmother's family and to my parents as they converted an international graduate family apartment into a home. My grandparents aided in this goal by sending gifts for us through the suitcases of other Romanian immigrants. As in many cultures, Romanian homes are typically defined by “table covers, bed spreads, and doilies of every kind and size [filling] all the available spaces, and each was made at home by weaving in an intricate pattern or by embroidery”.<sup>56</sup> I reference this decoration in the objects on the tables, but also in the amount of surface area that is covered in material.

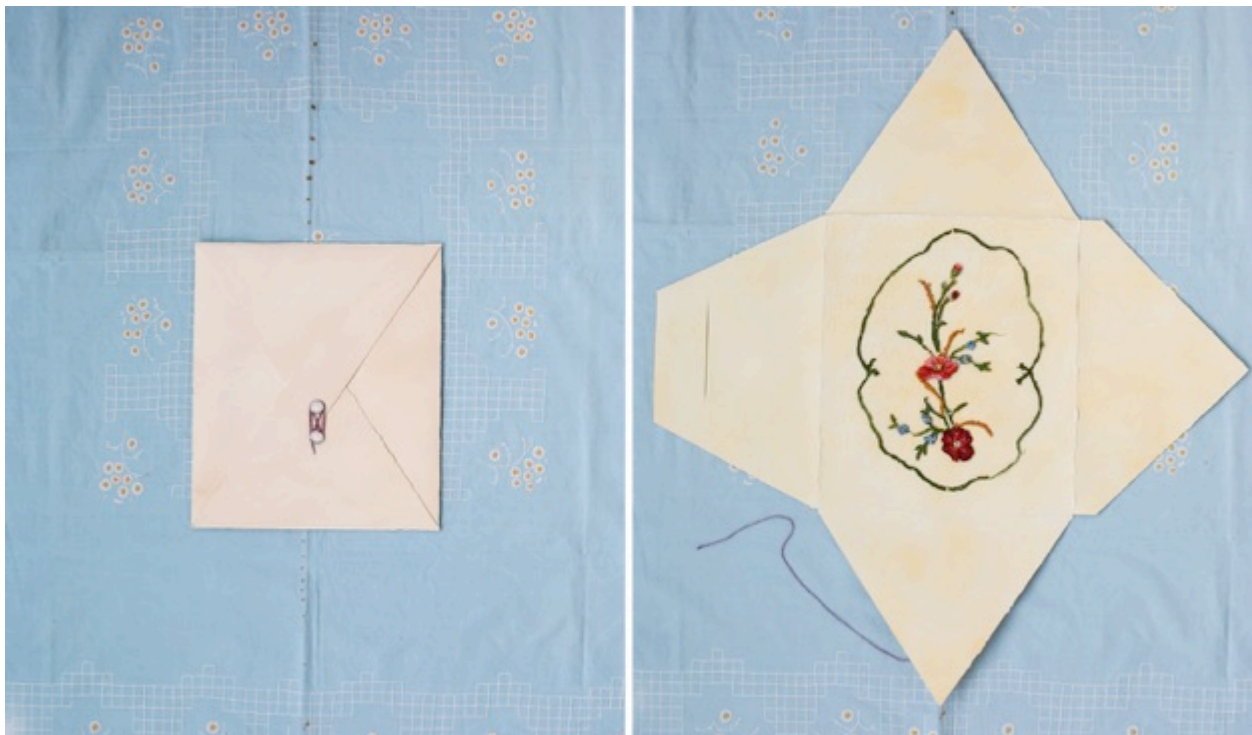
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<sup>54</sup> Harkness, *Romanian Embroidery*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Harkness, *Romanian Embroidery*, 4.

<sup>56</sup> Harkness, *Romanian Embroidery*, 9.

“When youth grow up in families where individuals, goods, money, ideas, and practices of the origin country circulate on a regular basis, their socialization incorporates norms specific to both the receiving and sending countries. Thus they acquire social contacts and skills that are useful in both settings. In other words, transnational practices of the second generation can depend on their relation to cultural, family, and social norms and values transmitted from previous generations.”<sup>57</sup>



*Envelope: Nightstand Replica*, Thread and dissolved PVA fabric with paper and thread, 2018.

The transfer of objects was a two-way relationship. I, too, as a child transported presents through my checked luggage on my annual summer pilgrimage. It was a round-trip exchange: other Romanian families in the Dallas area would ask for me to take things to their families abroad, and I would stow watches, perfume, and other such things to bring back to Texas. They would be bundled with labels on post-it notes for the appropriate families.

<sup>57</sup> Nibbs and Brettell, *Identity and the Second Generation*, 124. In this passage, they cite Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller’s “Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society” as a reference.

Before this, I had been largely clothed by the generosity of local church groups that organized meetings specifically for immigrant families, mostly those associated with local universities. My grandparents also sent clothes for me in early years — my grandmother knitted sweaters for me, and all three grandparents sent the clothes they were able to find in markets. They often bore incorrect english writing on them, making the warm and thoughtful gesture awkward. It was stuck in that strange in-between — they didn't want to send me clothing with Romanian on it, imagining it would be alienating in an American context, but they also didn't know it wouldn't fit in either.

My grandmothers always seemed to have the strangest proportions for pillows. I realized later it was because they were custom — it was common to have them made and stuffed by a local seamstress. I realized this when hearing my mom speak to her mother about the need and love of “puiut” pillows. Puiut is a diminutive of a word already meant to signify youngling or small thing — like a baby chick. It is both the affectionate nickname my parents use for me, and the term my family uses for small square pillows. My mom expressed a wish for more to take with her back to Texas, and my grandmother ordered some at the local tailor. I have grown so accustomed to this steady transfer of objects — when do you take something, and when does it return?

### **Give More Than You Take**

“Give More Than You Take” is the title of the Jim Hodges exhibition that traveled across the United States, opening first at the Dallas Museum of Art in 2013, where I saw it numerous times. Prior to that exhibition, I had never walked into a contemporary artist's show and felt deep

recunoaștere<sup>58</sup>. I was struck by such strong, immediate kinship with Hodges' clear desire of working within a variety of media to express lifelong themes, that I felt like the wind was knocked out of my stomach. Walking through the gallery spaces, there were delicate, translucent scarves stitched together, colored pencil rings etched directly onto the wall, ink prints transferred through saliva onto paper, a russian-doll of button-down shirts nestled into one another, an imagined going-out outfit crumpled on the floor, a display of floral drawings on napkins, broken disco balls reassembled into fractured mirrors, silk flowers pinned onto the wall in a sprawling arrangement. There was an unmistakable tone of love, loss, time, and care that permeated the entire exhibition, despite its disparate forms. His work feels open, vulnerable, and strong all at once.



Jim Hodges, *With the Wind*, 1997, Dallas Museum of Art.

Hodges and I share a use of family materials — in “With the Wind“, he uses a collection of scarves, including material<sup>59</sup> from his grandmother.<sup>60</sup> I used a sheer purple scarf from my

<sup>58</sup> Recognition, in Romanian. As I was writing this, I realized the word for what I mean was only coming to me in Romanian or French (*reconnaissance*).

<sup>59</sup> “Material” in Romanian means fabric. As I was writing this, I momentarily was confused upon rereading this, but found it to be a personal example of the language-switching I encounter in my writing process.

maternal grandmother as a stitched veil coverlet on one of the paintings on a luggage rack table: a lunch scene of scrumbie fish on my plate. When I once walked through “Give More Than You Take” with my mother, she turned to me and dumbfoundedly said, “it’s almost like you titled these”. Hodges’ titles often read as sentence fragments and implicate the viewer in a conversational tone, such as “here it comes”(2009) and “look and see”(2005). I believe his titles help set up a perceived intimacy between a viewer and himself. In my own work, I hope to achieve this relationship with the offer of handling delicate materials that bear my hand in its stitches and strokes, as well as my handwritten notes.

The title of the exhibition has stuck with me — a quiet refrain through personal and studio life. It is a note to myself and to others. I offer what I can and so often it has prompted an exchange with others. In sharing my work through the thesis exhibition, so many viewers have come to me with their messages regarding the themes of care, home, and storytelling.



*Lunch Setting*, Acrylic on paper with thread and scarf, 25x30 inches, 2018.

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<sup>60</sup> Personal notes from Jim Hodges’ artist talk at the Dallas Museum of Art, 2013.



## **Stereotypical Expectations of One Another: The Dracula and Cowboy Phenomenon<sup>61</sup>**

Our perceptions of places we haven't been to are subject to the perceptions and framing of others. Thanks to the internet and other widespread access to media documentation and footage, we have a wider spectrum of coverage and insight into what we haven't experienced ourselves. When I think of Romania, my understanding is highly specific to my family and the ways they lovingly shaped my experience. I think of places I don't know from direct experience, and how they're colored by pop culture, stereotypes, and remarks from others.

As cited in the exhibition's video piece, I was often met with questions of "who shot J.R.?" in Romania when I said I lived in Dallas. And like many Texans, I even more frequently encountered questions of whether I owned a horse and if we all dressed like cowboys.<sup>62</sup> Growing up, the only reason my peers seemed to know about Romania was through Dracula. I remember a classmate thinking my pointy, baby canines were evidence of a potential link to a vampiric heritage.

My particular "in-between" is settled between Romania and the United States. This is reflected in my embroidery on a black gingham pouch: "stuck between the mythology of the cowboy and the vampire — each one believing in the other". The fabric pocket contains two prints of works I made in my graduate studio in Richmond and on residency in London, each image situated in one of the two apartments of my grandparents. One photo shows a tablecloth stained with acrylic washes on the dinner table in my maternal grandmother's living room. She had given me the tablecloth because she'd deemed it unfit for entertaining guests as it was riddled with holes and patches of yellowed stains. I attempted to mend and highlight the threadbare points of weakness with colored thread and extended the pattern of staining into

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<sup>61</sup> Bonus points to J.K. Rowling for throwing dragons into the mix with her numerous citations of dragons in Romania.

<sup>62</sup> My parents have a lot of nostalgia for Cowboy Westerns because a lot of John Wayne movies were aired during Communism.

larger areas. I then returned the tablecloth to her apartment. The other photo is a view of the room where my paternal grandparents would call us through Skype. In the image, a painted, lace-trimmed bed sheet rests on top of a rug that it was originally intended to replicate. While in Richmond, I had attempted to stain the sheet with the rug pattern in acrylic. While I had a couple of photos that included the rug, I didn't have enough information to fill it in, and couldn't figure out the system of how colors are distributed in the weaving. On my next trip, I brought it in my suitcase to rest alongside the original, rug to rug. These two instances were attempts of documenting a return, a cycle of sorts, providing evidence of the meeting of two points, and thus are housed in the "in between" pouch.



The Cowboy and Vampire pouch, 2019.

## Airflow

In Romanian, “curent” is the word used to describe the airflow in spaces. I wasn’t really aware of the role of windows in managing circulation until I first went to Romania, because I was so used to the necessary presence of air conditioning in Texas. In Romania, however, air conditioning was very uncommon when I was young. Additionally, my grandparents believed you would get extraordinarily sick from being around it — despite my insistence that it was our lifeline in Texan summers.<sup>63</sup> Thus, I was introduced to the delicate game of balancing the cycle of air in an apartment. All the windows in my maternal grandmother’s apartment were lined up on one side. The rule of the house was always ensuring that there wasn’t an open loop of circulation between rooms. What I mean by this is that if the kitchen window was open as well as the adjoining balcony door in the living room, the door between the kitchen and living room must be closed. It was believed that resting in the middle of an open loop would make you vulnerable to illness. This vigilance felt so specific to my time in Romania as it was so uncommon to open windows in Texas. My vision of my grandmother’s apartment is that things were always in motion; curtains framed every possible vertical space and moved with the shifting winds.

In my time at graduate school, my beloved studio was typically the warmest of all the studios because of its maximum sunlight exposure, a feature I loved. Save for a brutal thunderstorm, I had the windows permanently open. Because of the constant air flow in my studio, I grew accustomed to the textile works I made always being in motion, whether it was a strong billow or the subtlest of waves. Once I brought out the Southfork Ranch drawing to an isolated critique room for an installation test and it suddenly felt lifeless when it remained utterly

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<sup>63</sup> A general part of Romanian culture is the belief that cold things will get you very sick. It took me about eight years to convince my grandparents I wouldn’t get sick if I drank water from the fridge. One summer, they insisted I keep each bite of ice cream in my mouth for thirty seconds so I wouldn’t catch a cold.

still. In the context of bringing the work out of the studio and into my thesis installation, I wanted to bring about movement in the most subtle way possible. I placed a small clip-on fan on the ceiling ledge, directed at an edge of the linen drawing to produce the faintest of movement. I appreciated the barely-perceptible softness with the added bonus of a quiet hum from the whirring blades of the fan. Midway through the exhibition, I happened to be in an adjacent gallery while two viewers were taking extra care to parse through small details of my installation choices. I overheard them excitedly notice the small white fan blending into the ceiling as they looked for the source of the fabric's movement. It is often a challenge for artists to adapt work from the conditions of the studio to the exhibition space, but this trial of bringing about artificial movement felt aligned with my family's philosophy of "making do" with what is possible and available.

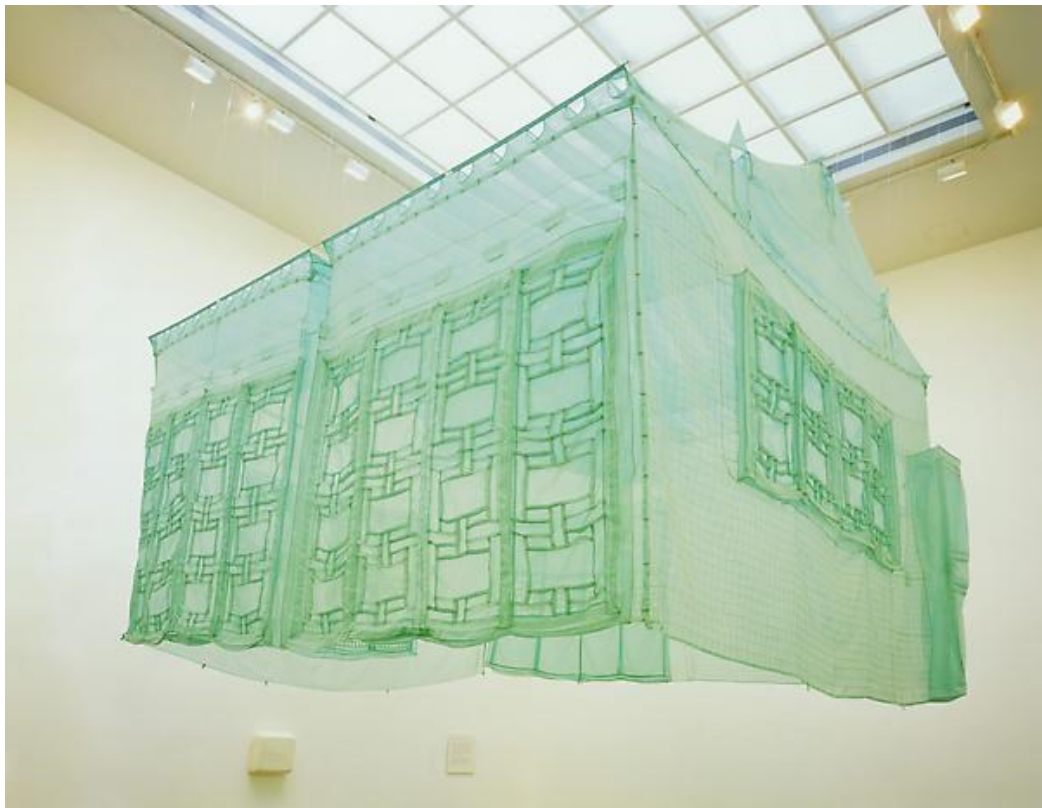
### **On Distance**

Do Ho Suh's 2002 exhibition for the Serpentine Gallery in London and the Seattle Art Museum included two artworks entitled "Seoul Home..." and "348 West 22nd St...". The two works are to-scale recreations of his childhood home in Korea, and the New York residence at the time of exhibition. Meticulously constructed, the architectural models are stitched from translucent nylon fabric, and supported by metal armatures. Each time either work is displayed at a new venue, the city is added to the title, i.e. "London Home", serving as the exhibition's own catalogue itinerary and mapping the piece's trajectory across the world.<sup>64</sup> While the original sources of the works were confined to two distinct homes, this titling practice extends the notion of home to expand to the lived experiences of the works themselves. In the exhibition catalogue, Miwon Kim notes that "even though the works replicate existing architectural structures in very

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<sup>64</sup> Miwon Kwon, *Do-Ho Suh*. (London and Seattle, WA: Serpentine Gallery and Seattle Art Museum, 2002), 17.

specific locations, they are more about transience and mobility than permanence.”<sup>65</sup> Although “Seoul Home” was constructed inside its source home, it then travelled extensively, which in Suh’s viewpoint, questions its site-specificity.<sup>66</sup> In an interview for PBS and Art21, Suh explains that he views home as a notion that can be infinitely repeated, defining home as “something that you carry along with your life”.<sup>67</sup> These statements deeply resonate with my personal drive and decision-making regarding my thesis work. Home is uncertain and constantly evolving, but the approach of iterations feels fitting, making change part of the process.



Do Ho Suh, *Seoul Home/Baltimore Home/London Home/Seattle Home/L.A. Home*, Silk, 1999, Courtesy Lehmann Maupin.

While Suh’s New York Apartment installation is accessible for visitor exploration, viewers literally cannot enter the space of his Seoul recreation — it hangs above like a specter, a

<sup>65</sup> Kwon, *Do-Ho Suh*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> “Seoul Home/L.A. Home”.

<sup>67</sup> “Seoul Home/L.A. Home”.

looming presence. It is always installed at a large clearance, meant to hover several feet above people's heads. I view this discrepancy in distance as indication of the different levels of accessibility to these places for Suh himself, but also as a gesture of defining private boundaries.

I have never seen Do Ho Suh's work in person. I have flipped through catalogues and scrolled through screens, but have not yet had the chance to walk through hallways stitched of translucent nylon. Even in documentation, Suh's installations move me. I find companionship with his belief that the process of making can address feelings of homesickness and longing.<sup>68</sup> He brought the entirety of "Seoul Home..." to L.A. in two suitcases after making it. Our interests in transitive homemaking feel intertwined, and reading how he talks about his work has helped me formulate my own thoughts.

### **Veils/Translucency**

Translucency has served as a constant in my work for as long as I can remember. Whether shown through the stain of thin paint or sheer fabric layers, the seesaw of revealing and concealing is steadily at play. I relate this to my interest in how multiple layers of allegiances<sup>69</sup> affect our perception in all experiences. Stacks of translucent materials will develop new relationships to one another as they are moved about, which parallels my interest in the non-linear narratives that are formed as viewers engage with my work in different combinations. In *Parallel Pattern*, translucency is present in the plexiglass of the luggage-rack tables, the household stain on a tablecloth, the painted stain on paper and fabric, and the sheer layers of color that form from the stacking and overlapping of table objects. Many of my drawings and paintings are housed in translucent containers, which provide a peek of their contents while also

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<sup>68</sup> "Seoul Home/L.A. Home".

<sup>69</sup> By allegiances, I reference its use towards relationship to nationhoods in the U.S. Naturalization Oath, but also the infinite list of associations we accrue in life that shape our thoughts and feelings.

protecting the details from immediate view. In some instances, the containers also provide some slight resistance to being handled, as corners get snagged on seams. In the case of an 11x14 inch watercolor painting duo, the container is a sheer pocket made from a warm pink, floral laser-cut fabric. The small cutouts of the flower shapes show the bare drawing, but the majority is overlaid with a pink tint until a viewer ventures to pull the drawings out. Objects are affected by the visual properties of their containers, running parallel to my experience.



Peasant woman watercolor with sewn lace trims on one of the tables, 2019.

## The Piece of Shame

In Romania, we have an expression for the last of something available in a hosting context. In my experiences in the United States and Romania, guests will hesitate to take something if it is the last one of what is being offered. The host would label whatever it may be — the last cookie, last cherry, last desirable thing, “a piece of shame” and tell the guests to take their shame away. This now serves as request, reacting to the customs of considerateness when taking what is offered. In an American context, I especially love using this phrase. Because it is a new concept, it is often met with a laugh and immediately changes the tone to an easy invitation of enjoying the last of what is available.

I was reminded of this the first time I set out a cake for a side project I executed for our graduate group show in the gallery earlier this spring semester. During the course of the exhibition, I made three cakes<sup>70</sup> with pre-cut slices that set up an exchange: anyone could take a slice of cake if they promised to fulfill a request.<sup>71</sup> The first time I set out a cake, a sole standing slice remained untouched for several hours, despite the fact that the previous fifteen had been consumed with steady succession. This was presumably because people felt uncertain about taking the last of it. The second time I set out a cake, people seemed far less abashed about claiming a slice.

As a frame of reference for this body of work, the piece of shame can also refer to the physical distance between family members created by leaving for the chance of better opportunities. It can also apply to the inferiority complex of a nation, an attitude that lingers through various shades of corruption and hardship. I certainly like the definition best when

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<sup>70</sup> The first cake was chocolate with cream cheese icing. The second was vegan chai spice with vanilla bean “buttercream” and was made with help of my dear friend and peer, Su Yu. The third was a four-tier Arabic Coffee chocolate cake with coffee buttercream icing, and was made with help of my lovely friend and peer, Hannah Shaban.

<sup>71</sup> Each cake’s request was intended to pay a generosity or form of connection forward, so to speak. This is an example of my “Give More Than You Take” refrain.



applied in the framework of playing host — it holds the potential of lessening the burden of wanting more.

I discussed the expression of the piece of shame with a dear friend and fellow graduate student of last year, Azim Al Ghusseini. Azim's work explores host and guest relationships in the context of sharing and acclimation.<sup>72</sup> Our conversations surrounding the creation of home and our shared love of making things for others sparked many connections and refined decisions throughout my time in graduate school. Another friend and peer of my year, Su Yu, makes work with the intention of creating a space of belonging from a close community that helps each other grow, without being bound to any particular identifiers or grounded in a physical space.

### **Conclusion: On Maintenance**

Much of this writing and work was developed through finding kinship in the story-telling of others and feeling seen and understood. It is through seeing other people's work and reading interviews and research that I connected more dots and remembered more details. This process is embedded in its making — I share to ground myself and continue my family's chain of values, but also as an open gesture of mutual exchange. It is thanks to these writers, artists, and the friends I have conversed with, that I have felt seen, or found shared feelings and experience amidst our varied, layered backgrounds.

In 1969, Mierle Laderman Ukeles wrote "Manifesto for Maintenance Art" as a proposal for an exhibition entitled, "Care". In it, Ukeles outlines an exhibition centered around the necessary, boring, drag-your-feet routines of everyday domesticity, presented as artwork. While Ukeles and I have different approaches and proposals in our work, this advocacy for those who

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<sup>72</sup> Azim Al Ghusseini, "[YOU ARE WITH] KIN AND [YOU CAN BE AT] EASE", Abstract. <https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=6574&context=etd>. This title has served as a backdrop of my second year of graduate school as he gifted me a welcome mat he painted with this phrase. I've kept it at the entrance of my studio.

maintain is entirely important and a component of my aims. The attempt to maintain a family legacy of any kind requires a range of care, taxing to enjoyable. There is responsibility and burden present in being the sole, bottom link of a chain. However, I feel grounded and enriched in the maintenance, or even, the upholding of what my family has held dear. Sharing this daisy chain of value grounds me and prepares a terrain of exchange with others. I owe all the richness in my life to the examples of generosity and care set by my family, and all that I have received in return for trying to model those practices myself.

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